

A HOME THAT BREAKS, A HOME THAT BONDS: ANNE TYLER'S *DINNER AT THE HOMESICK RESTAURANT*

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ABSTRACT

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." quoted Leo Tolstoy. A family is composed of an assorted package of people with differences, loves, hates, jealousies, camaraderie etc. It keeps alive some of the strongest and most intense feelings either severing or binding ties. Yet, of all social institutions, family is indisputably the one on which individuals would count on for unconditional support and understanding in spite of paradoxes. Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), set in Baltimore, Maryland, is a stirring novel of relationships among the Tull family. The novel's uniqueness is that incidents common to the family are interpreted through the perceptions and reactions of the three children Cody, Ezra and Jenny. Each of the Tulls go through trauma and breaking points due to conflict within the family especially after their father deserts them. Regret often echoes through the thoughts and words of the characters. At its climax, realization, and forgiveness save the family from further disintegration and unifies them instead.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Breaking Point, Hate, Regret, Realization, Forgiveness

INTRODUCTION

[Anne Tyler]: "I always say that family life serves the same useful purpose as those high-rise fires in disaster movies. It throws people together at close quarters and allows their true characters to emerge. And unlike mere friends, family members can't very easily give up on each other and walk away; they have to stick it out. So there you have the perfect breeding ground for a plot."

The term 'homesick' is generally understood as - missing home - but in Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the term "homesick" also means--being fed up of the restrictions and strictures at home; being psychologically debilitated as a result of traumatic experiences due to dubious parental examples. It is a paradox that Jenny Tull expresses when she learns that her brother Ezra plans to change the elegant Scarlatti restaurant into the home he never had; Jenny warns that many of his customers will reject the "homelike," "family" atmosphere of "The Homesick Restaurant" as reminiscent of the very houses they are longing to escape from. Jenny explains, "maybe people go to restaurants to get away from home" (76).

Beck, Pearl and their three children Cody, Ezra and Jenny, make up the Tull family. The reader is drawn into the novel where eighty-five year old Pearl who on her death bed, casts a backward eye on her life of strife having had to singlehandedly take care of her children aged 14, 11 and 9, after her husband Beck deserts the family. As a single parent,

Pearl courageously struggles to care for her family. She is uncompromising in virtues and values, though oftentimes harsh in its imposition. The novel examines the strengths and weakness of individuals and how siblings may share the same events yet experience them differently. The home becomes a hell hole for some and warrants distancing from, yet, family bonds keep them orbiting near enough to be there for each other. "One Sunday night in 1944, he said he didn't want to stay married. ...Pearl felt she was sinking in at the center, like someone given a stomach punch" (7).

DISCUSSIONS

Beck Tull a sales man at the Tanner Corporation decides to leave his family after twenty years of married life. With no convincing reason and stating no desire to visit his children, he leaves, offering to send some money every month. Pearl hopes Beck would reconsider and return, but when weeks turn to months she is convinced that he will not. Being a proud and strong willed woman, Pearl suppresses her angst from her children, her family back home and the society around her. Though middle aged she takes up a job as cashier at Sweeny Brothers Grocery and Fine Produce, to sustain her family. Pearl misses Beck, but she cannot express her grief or cry because "It was unthinkable to cry in front of the children. Or in front of anyone." (13). Life in its uncut form turns Pearl as expressed by Cody, into "A raving, shrieking, unpredictable witch"(305). Unknown to the children life suddenly took on a serious hue for Pearl and in her effort to do everything to perfection: "She'd been continually on edge; She'd felt too burdened, too much alone...so preoccupied with paying the rent and juggling the budget...called the doctor at two a.m. ... confronted the neighbourhood bully when Ezra got beaten up, hosed the roof during Mrs. Simmon's chimney fire. (19)

As parents Beck and Pearl wrong their children, and the outcome of their doing is debilitating. In spite of her love for them, Pearl Tull is unrighteous to Cody, Ezra and Jenny. Her anger, ferocity and lack of emotional warmth affect each child in a different way and with varying results. Ezra becomes wary of any emotional display while Jenny becomes fearful and timid. Cody's challenge is twofold—one, Pearl's unreasonable rages and second, her blatant preference for Ezra whom Cody can never match up to; making Cody a jealous and mean human being. Cody took Pearl's wrath personally and believed that he was responsible for his mother's rages because he was in some way responsible for his father's desertion and that his siblings were merely caught in the crossfire. During her diatribes, when she would call them "neighbourhood savages," (52), Cody felt that it was directed at him. Until his mother's death he lives feeling unloved and unaccepted. Petry observes that "Cody seem[ed] unable to comprehend either that Pearl love[d] him, or that her abusive outbursts resulted not from hatred of him but from the frustration of not being able to provide for him properly" (*Understanding* 191). Ezra and Jenny longed for the loving maternal warmth that Josiah Payson, Ezra's best friend, enjoyed and they wished that Pearl could be more like his mother. Cody Tull probably the most disturbed soul longs for Pearl to be more motherly--both in appearance and in personality. He develops into a downhearted, embittered child and remains so as an adult. Consequently like his mother Pearl, who after being sinned against, sins most.

With the passing of years Cody, Ezra and Jenny realize that their father is not returning home but they never ask Pearl about Beck. Pearl maintains the fiction of a happy family and never lets anyone outside the family know about Beck's desertion. Her determined effort keeps the family together till the very end. She singlehandedly takes care of the family even through the most trying times and prides herself for that one true accomplishment. "Didn't that show how little importance a father has? The invisible man. The absent presence. ...It was the greatest triumph of her life" (19).

But the children, who were defenceless, miss their father, especially when their mother turns violent. They keep to themselves, rarely bringing a friend home for fear of their mother's disapproval. Cody remembers his childhood as a harsh time with memories of a fantastic labyrinth of bitterness. Ironically though, in his angry determination to reject what he recalls as a miserable home life, he only mimics more vigorously the very qualities he seeks to escape.

Even the neighbourhood acknowledged Pearl as an unsociable woman. Cody in fact was aware that his mother was known in as "Sweeney Meanie": "Tight little bun on the back of her head. Mouth like it's holding straight pins. Anybody dawdles, tries to pass the time of day, she'll say, 'Move along, please. Please move along'" (46). She completely discouraged friendly relations with neighbours and encouraged a sense of isolation in her children by telling them, "'We Tulls depend on ourselves, only on each other. We don't look to the rest of the world for any help whatsoever'" (96). As a result, Cody felt that he was "an outsider, unfamiliar with the neighbourhood" (60). He compared his mother to the mothers of his friends and was resentful that she had no personal friendships."What he wouldn't give to have a mother who acted like other mothers! He longed to see her gossiping with a little gang of women in the kitchen, letting them roll her hair up in pincurls, trading beauty secrets, playing cards,"(60)--all activities which he was certain his mother would have derided. Cody disapproved of his mother's disconnection and restraint because it set him apart from his peer group which made him less comfortable with others.

Perhaps Pearl's most serious aberration against Cody, and the one with the most tragic repercussions, is her favouritism toward Ezra. Pearl admits loving Ezra more because of his docile and loving nature. Moreover, of the three children Ezra was the only one who was the most open with her and was the easiest to love. Cody resents his mother favouring Ezra and takes elaborate effort to elevate his mother's opinion of him by projecting Ezra in a negative light. However, Pearl sees through every one of Cody's well planned mischief and it further ruins his relationship with his mother making her remark, "'you've been mean since the day you were born'" (65).

Though Pearl expresses to Cody how much she looked to him for strength, Cody's fails to understand her need for him. Pearl confesses, "I look to you for support now, Cody. You're the only person I can turn to; it may be you and I are more alike than you think."(65). But the magnitude of her statement is lost on Cody. Pearl is so caught up with life that she does not pause even for a moment to see one of her own sending out entreaties for a little attention and compassion. Unlike Ezra and Jenny who were only occasionally reminded of their father, Cody was old enough to understand Beck's desertion and could not come to terms with it. He craved for appreciation especially from his father and wished he could tell him 'Look at what I've accomplished,'... 'Notice where I've got to, how far I've come without you'"(48). His need for Beck is converted into an obsession to control his environment. He is also tormented with the thought that he's to blame for Beck's desertion and hence the cause for his mother's anger towards him.

Until Jenny leaves home for college, she is terrified of Pearl, remembering her as "...a dangerous person...her stinging slap...that could bloody a lip at a flick?. Memories of being slammed against a wall and being called "serpent," "cockroach," "hideous little snivelling guttersnipe." destroys her self esteem. She feels lonely and unsafe at home after Cody and Ezra leave home. Her disturbing experiences at home make her an anorexic with a subconscious urge to not comply to her mother's wishes. Like Cody she distances herself from her mother but after two failed marriages, a stressful job as a paediatrician, a young child to look after and a nervous breakdown, it is Pearl who helps her recover. Surprisingly, Jenny makes a complete recovery and emerges a changed person -- no more the intense person. Ezra on the other hand takes up employment at a restaurant and devotes all his energies to it. The restaurant where he works becomes the

substitute to a “real home” and the owner Mrs Scarlatti’s genuine affection more than makes up for what he did not get from his mother. Ezra uses every opportunity to bring his family together by arranging dinners but his family is not able to sit through a whole meal.

With time Ezra and Jenny are able to conquer the trauma in their lives but Cody who suffers from poor self-esteem is driven and miserable, incapable of enjoyment except for the triumph of competition. He remains jealous of Ezra, whom he considers “his oldest enemy”(156) when in truth he is his own enemy. Hence it comes as no surprise that Tyler describes Cody as “a cuticle chewer, a floor pacer, a hair rummager. No wonder, when he slept at night, he ground his teeth so hard that his jaws ached every morning” (137). Bitter, paranoid, suspicious, and jealous, Cody still believes that he is in competition with Ezra--in a "neck and neck struggle" (156) that he attempts to win by stealing Ezra's fiancée Ruth. Almost boyish with red hair, sallow skin and callused hands and feet, Ruth is not the type of woman Cody would be attracted to. But he wants to win Ruth because she was Ezra's.

Petry expresses that perhaps Cody is trying to mimic Ezra. There is no doubt that he loves his brother because when one of Cody's former girlfriends make an unkind remark about Ezra being “a *motherly* man,” Cody had been hurt enough to drop her; he felt that “she really hadn't understood Ezra; she hadn't appreciated what he was all about” (171). And when he is off to New York with Ezra's girl Ruth a scratch of music in the air reminds him of Ezra on his pearwood recorder and his heart aches for his brother: “a tune piped, a burble of notes, a little scrap of melody flowing by on the wind and breaking his heart.” However, nothing can justify Cody's act and he cannot be forgiven. The efficiency consultant that Cody is, sadly leaves behind a trail of unhappy family and is none the better himself.

Cody's marriage to Ruth has disastrous consequences for both Cody and Ezra. While it breaks Ezra's heart and takes the sunshine out of his life, it does not bring Cody the satisfaction of a victor. Cody is forever suspicious of Ruth and fears she still loves Ezra and might go back to him. He also believes that Ezra is out to lure his wife and son Luke who he feels looks like Ezra. Perhaps it is his guilt that's tormenting him. Once when Luke plays a tune on his wooden whistle he accuses him of reminding him deliberately of Ezra:

“You're haunting me, isn't that it? I can't get away from him! I spend half my life with meek-and-mild Ezra and his blasted wooden whistle; I make my escape at last, and now look: here we go again. It's like a conspiracy! Like some kind of plot where someone decided, long before " was born, I would live out my days surrounded by people who were ... nicer than I am, just naturally nicer without even having to try, people that other people preferred. (233)

The climax of the novel is when Pearl dies. At the time of her death, Jenny is thrice married. She shows no traces of her old disturbed self. She is completely in control of her life now. Though she too suffered the brunt of a troubled childhood and unwittingly abuses her daughter Becky, she consciously transforms herself when she realizes the unfairness of her actions. Ezra manages to bear up in spite of some of the unfair incidents in his life. He camouflages his ache for a real home by immersing himself in the running of Homesick Restaurant. Only Cody remains confused and unhappy and ever suspicious of everyone. Cody receives deliverance only in the final scene of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*--deliverance through forgiveness that helps unburden his guilt and allow him to redeem his past by viewing it from a different perspective.

Before Pearl dies she instructs Ezra to invite Beck to her funeral and at the close of the novel ironically both Pearl and Beck are instrumental in helping Cody heal from the years of turmoil. Beck is truly astonished at how well his children have come up in life and give credit to Pearl for it. Like a puzzle that has its pieces finally in place, Cody is able to gather valuable information from his father regarding the reasons for his desertion. Beck confesses to Cody his fears of failing Pearl as a husband and as a father. Beck admits his own flaws: "No matter how hard I tried, seemed like everything I did got muddled. Spoiled. Turned into an accident" (312).

Beck genuinely praises Pearl for facing life head on and for looking after the family even without his assistance. He accepts his weakness and feels ashamed for shying away at a time when he should have stood by the family. He confesses to Cody: "What it was, I guess: it was the grayness; grayness of things; half-right-and-half-wrongness of things. Everything tangled, mingled, not perfect any more. I couldn't take that. Your mother could, but not me. Yes sir, I have to hand it to your mother" (313). Beck's disclosure immediately transforms Cody and his entire perspective of his childhood changes in an instant. When the truth unravels Cody is able to clear his mind of all bitterness. He has a new perspective of his mother and the others in his family and all old memories take on a softer happier hue.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps Pearl's last request that Beck be invited to the funeral is with the hope for reconciliation between Beck and the children. It is as if Pearl could almost predict the happy outcome of a funeral dinner with the entire family being present. The novel definitely suggests that family bonds are not only inescapable but can also be healing. Tyler comments of the novel: "With *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, I just wanted to show both sides of family life--that it can be horrific at times, but that it is the one situation that we are generally forced to go on with, even so, picking ourselves up and trying again in the morning. And that is valuable in itself." Considered one of Tyler's best novels *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1983.

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